

A Perfectly Good Explanation by orphan_account

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Summary:

Lois Peterson is the guidance counselor at Hawkins Middle School, and as of late she's been seeing a lot more of Mike Wheeler. She tries to get to the bottom of his recent behavioral problems during their sessions together - yelling at a teacher, plagiarizing an essay, drawing graffiti in the bathroom - but Mike is nothing if not secretive.

A Perfectly Good Explanation

Strike One

Lois Peterson went into the field of psychology with a grand vision - she would help students pull themselves out of their despair and into a life of academic progress with nothing but her words of encouragement, colorfully printed pamphlets, and winning smile.

She can't determine for the life of her how her lofty aspirations led to this moment, a sullen thirteen-year-old sitting across from her. (And probably wishing her death, if she's honest with herself.)

Lois opens up the manilla folder gingerly, looking at his file. "You've got very good grades, Mr. Wheeler," she says.

"You sound surprised."

She blinks a few times, eyeing him through the thick lenses of her coke-bottle glasses. "Well it's just that -"

"That the kids you get in here for shouting at their teachers aren't usually the president of the AV Club. Yeah, I get it."

"Precisely," she says, but she has a feeling he's laid a trap and she's fallen in face-first. Michael Wheeler, thus far, hasn't proven himself to be someone terribly amicable with adults. "So would you like to explain to me why you felt the need to lash out at..." She pauses, glancing down at the folder. "Mr. Kowalski?"

No, Mike doesn't want to explain why he felt the need to lash out at Mr. Kowalski.

Because that would require explaining Eleven, and explaining Eleven would just remind him that she's gone.

And potentially trigger government interference. (There's no way this

office hasn't been bugged by Hawkins Lab.)

And probably make him cry. (He really doesn't want to give Miss Peterson the satisfaction of seeing him cry.)

The truth of the matter is that Mr. Kowalski was just being insensitive. And the poems he chose for the students to read were stupid. Who gave him the right to force the eighth graders to read poetry anyway? So Mike got frustrated. *Sue me*, he thinks.

He didn't want to read Viorst. (Nothing's fun to laugh about. Nothing's fun to play.)

He didn't want to read Aguirre. (Because saying goodbye is never enough.)

He didn't want to read Frost. (Nothing gold can stay.)

And the happy poems were even worse.

So he threw his book, watching it splay open when it smacked against the wall. "This is bullshit," he announced. "What do they know anyway?"

"Excuse me?" Mr. Kowalski looked up from his desk.

"I said," Mike repeated, "that this is bullshit."

"Language, Mr. Wheeler."

"Why do we have to read poetry anyway?"

"Poetry is an insight into the human experience," Mr. Kowalski said, smug.

"Poets don't know anything about real life. They're fucking liars!"

Will reached out, putting a hand on Mike's arm, but he shrugged it off.

"Out of my classroom, Mr. Wheeler," Mr. Kowalski said, his tone

deep and foreboding.

"You can't kick me out," Mike spat, "I'm leaving."

So here he is, now, across from the guidance counselor who would probably try to give him a million different resources about dealing with *grief* and *feelings* and *anger* and he doesn't want to hear it.

"Michael," she starts, but he cuts her off before she can continue.

"It's Mike," he tells her, rolling his eyes.

"Mike," she says, and the name seems to stick to her tongue like peanut butter. "I'm just here to help."

"Yeah, so is every other adult at Hawkins Middle School," he says. "And you're all doing a piss poor job of it."

She chooses to ignore his statement. "Unfortunately, I will have to call your parents about this incident."

"Okay."

That's good, at least. He's not afraid of his parents. (She always worries about the ones that flinch when she brings up the dreaded phone call.)

Or maybe he's just not afraid of repercussions. Maybe he's got nothing left to lose.

"I'd just like to ask that this doesn't happen again, alright? I know you're already going to be serving detention with Mr. Clarke, but next time the punishment may be a bit more severe."

"I don't make promises that I can't keep," he says, and the office door is slamming behind him before Lois can react.

Strike Two

"Oh dear," Lois says. She looks at the folder in front of her, then at the boy on the other side of her desk. "Plagiarism, Michael?"

"It's Mike," he says, arms crossed. "And yeah. Plagiarism."

"That's very unfortunate." She shuffles the papers in front of her, trying to keep her hands busy. "You know, the vice principal recommended you for suspension for academic dishonesty, but I talked him down to a week of lunch detentions."

"Great."

"Is something wrong?"

"Only if you consider plagiarism wrong, I guess. And I wouldn't be here if you didn't."

"You understand," she begins, "why plagiarism is unacceptable?"

He sits for a moment, scratching his ankle with the heel of his converse. His eyes don't leave the floor. His arms are still crossed.

"Michael?"

"I mean, yeah, obviously I know why plagiarism isn't 'acceptable'. I'm not learning if I copy someone else's work."

"Then why did you do it?" she asks. He's a smart kid. It's really a pity. She knows there's an underlying cause; kids don't just act out like this. There's always a perfectly good explanation. If they were able to have more regular sessions, it's possible she could refer him to one of her college friends, a child psychologist, or another counselor specializing in trauma... but she hasn't yet been able to figure out Mike Wheeler.

Not that she hasn't tried.

"I don't know. I forgot to do my homework so it was easier to take someone else's when they weren't looking and copy it down."

That isn't strictly the truth either.

He could tell that Will hadn't slept as soon as Will slid down his locker to sit on the floor next to Mike. The bags under Will's eyes practically had their own zip code, and he was barely holding himself up.

Lucas joined them next, frantically pawing through his bookbag. "Did you guys finish the essay for History?"

"Yeah, I did mine last night," Mike told him.

"Aha!" Lucas whipped the notebook paper out of his bookbag. It was crumbled, but sufficient. "Got it! What about you, Will?"

Will shook his head. "I forgot."

"Is there still time?" Lucas glanced down at his watch. "Yikes, not really."

"Here," Mike murmured, pulling his essay out of his notebook. He handed it to Will. "Just... copy mine. I doubt Mrs. Wilson will even notice."

She noticed.

They handed in their essays at the beginning of class, and she filtered through them while they did their reading. Mike knew the jig was up when she furrowed her brow, looking at one essay with particular scrutiny and then flipping back through the papers to find another. She pulled another essay from the stack and looked back and forth between the two.

She stood, tapping first on Will's desk and then on Mike's.

"May I speak to you gentlemen in the hall, please?"

The door to the classroom had barely clicked shut when Mike spoke up. "It's not his fault," he said.

Mrs. Wilson raised her eyebrows at him. "What exactly isn't his fault, Mr. Wheeler?"

"The essay. I took it out of his bookbag and I just copied it down because I didn't have time to write my own."

"So you plagiarized?"

Will looked at Mike, wide-eyed.

"I didn't think you'd notice. I promise, it isn't Will's fault. He didn't even know that I took it out of his bag."

"Is this true?"

Will opened his mouth to speak, then caught Mike's eye. Mike nodded sharply. "Yes," Will told her. "Wait, when did you take it out of my bag?"

"When you were in the bathroom," Mike said, relieved that Will was playing along.

Mrs. Wilson turned to Will. "You can go back and continue the reading." Once he was gone, she addressed Mike. "Michael, what you did was plagiarism."

"I'm sorry. I'll rewrite the essay."

"Unfortunately that's not going to be adequate. You'll need to go to the office and speak to Miss Peterson and Vice Principal Riggs. And then you will rewrite the essay. For partial credit." She returned to her classroom, satisfied, and he started on the long walk to the school office.

So what is he supposed to tell Miss Peterson? That he took the fall for Will, who had neither the time nor the energy to write his own paper because he had another episode related to his stint in a dark, cold, alternate dimension?

Something tells him that's not an option.

"I learned my lesson," he offers. "I won't do it again."

And he won't. Next time he'll just write his own essay and another distinct one for Will.

"Alright," Lois says. "Get back to class, Mike."

Strike Three

Sometimes he skips English class so he can sit in his sister's car, where she hangs out during her study hall. Nancy is the closest thing he has to a supportive adult most of the time. She rubs his back and holds him close while he cries and offers up all of her sisterly advice. (She taught him how to apply wet cloths to his eyes so that no one can tell he's been crying. The last thing he needs is for Troy to shove him up against a locker and call him a little bitch, or something equally stupid.)

Nancy wasn't at school today, so he was left to his own devices.

...And now he's here. Again. Sitting in front of Lois Peterson, school counselor extraordinaire.

"Graffiti? Mike, what possessed you to graffiti the bathroom stall?"

"I was bored," he says.

It's not a lie, strictly speaking.

But before he was bored, he was distressed. He couldn't bear the idea of reading another stupid poem that Mr. Kowalski had picked out of his book of equally stupid poems, and then a girl in his science class had walked by wearing a pink dress, her blond hair brushing over her shoulders. He wasn't certain he'd make it to the bathroom before having a breakdown.

He crammed himself into the corner of a stall, locking the door and leaning against the wall. He let the tears fall, let himself wish it was her in the blond wig and her pink dress and those ridiculous socks. Someone walked in, washed their hands. He put his hand over his mouth so his sobs wouldn't give him away.

He stayed like that for a while, pressed up against the cold brick wall of the bathroom. It gave him time to think, to skim over the markings on the stall doors - pencil, pen, marker.

"RIP Barb :("

"TH + CM"

"TROY is a DICK"

He was pretty sure that last one was Dustin.

Others have scribbled phone numbers or swear words.

He didn't really think about it for very long. He pulled a marker out of his pocket and uncapped it, holding the cap between his teeth.

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No one will know what it means, he reasoned, but he will know that it's there.

He threw the door to the stall open, fumbling with the cap. The bathroom door opened and he knew this was it. Mr. Kowalski stared him down, the marker in one hand, the cap in the other, and a stall full of graffiti behind him.

"Mr. Wheeler -" he began.

"Yeah, yeah," Mike mumbled. "I know. 'Go to the office'." He moved past the teacher on his way out the door, muttering under his breath.

"You've become something of a disciplinary problem, Mike. We haven't known each other all that long but I feel like I've been seeing

quite a bit of you. Why is that?" Lois leans forward, resting her chin on her hands.

He shrugs. "I'm not trying to get in trouble."

"You're not trying to get caught, you mean."

"I guess you could say that."

"Do you feel that you have adults in your life that you can trust?"

His mother thinks that his lost best friend is a Russian spy, his father couldn't be bothered to give a shit, Nancy is still a kid herself, and obviously none of his teachers would understand...

"Not really."

Ouch. Lois had been hoping for some fluffy realization, some heartwarming moment in which he declared that she and she alone was someone he could pour his heart out to without fear of judgment.

She sighs. "Vice Principal Riggs is going to be heading up a small group of students to clean the graffiti in that particular bathroom. You'll need to speak with her to get the specifics, but I think that'll be adequate punishment for your crimes."

He nods, grabbing his bags and heading for the door.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?" he stands in the doorway, looking irritated. *I don't have all day*, his face says.

"Well, you know where to find me if you ever need anything," she says.

She's not expecting a thanks, but she gets one anyway.

Extra Innings

Petra Klaminsky is a huge bitch, but Lois would never say that to her face. *Of course* Petra would decide to come down with the flu the night of the Snow Ball, leaving Lois to fill in for her as the designated back-up chaperone.

Lois had grand plans for this evening, too. She was going to go out on the town with an old friend from high school, back in Hawkins for the weekend. Maybe go out to the town's only bar, have a few drinks, take him back home with her...

Anyway, Lois Peterson's plans for this evening did not involve stalking a gymnasium, ensuring that the middle schoolers remain at least one full foot away from each other at all times.

She gets a glass of punch from the high-schooler in the plaid dress manning the punchbowl and begins her rounds. Few of the students recognize her; it stands to reason that even if they would, they wouldn't call out to the woman they only see when they're facing disciplinary action. (Still, it doesn't stop her from feeling a little bit envious of Mr. Clarke, who at least gets a polite greeting as each student checks into the dance.)

Lois is about to go back for a second glass of punch when she spots Mike Wheeler, sitting by himself. For a split second, she debates going over and talking to him, but then she remembers that he's thirteen and there are fewer things less hip to a thirteen-year-old than their guidance counselor offering emotional support at the school dance.

It turns out, she doesn't have to.

The door to the gymnasium swings open, and a girl enters. Mike nearly knocks his chair over springing out of it, and he's across the gym in just a few long strides.

Lois smiles at the way his face immediately softens when he positions his hands on the girl's waist and they sway, albeit a bit out of step, to the music.

(She pretends to be looking the other way when Mike leans forward, placing a quick peck on the girl's lips. Perhaps she'll call him to her office come Monday to discuss this public display of affection.)

Come to think of it, she really hasn't seen Mike Wheeler in her office as of late.

She knew there was a perfectly good explanation.

Author's Note:

I thought it would be interesting to write this from the perspective of a character that's really clueless while also giving some justification for Mike's recent behaviors. Honestly this poor kid just needed a supportive adult. Let me know what you think!